

CURT WELDON

7TH DISTRICT, PENNSYLVANIA

2466 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-3807
(202) 225-2011

1554 GARRETT ROAD
UPPER DARBY, PA 19082
(610) 259-0700

63 WEST 4TH STREET
BRIDGEPORT, PA 19405
(610) 270-1486

E-mail: curtpa07@mail.house.gov
www.house.gov/curtweldon

MIGRATORY BIRD
CONSERVATION COMMISSION
REPUBLICAN STEERING COMMITTEE



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3807

August 9, 2006

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The Honorable James Nicholson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Nicholson:

I am writing to you regarding the recent report of yet another theft of a computer containing the personal information of at least 18,000 and as many as 38,000 veterans. While I can pardon the first such instance based on an errant miscalculation by a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employee, this string of repetitive compromising situations over the past three months, including two other cases in Minneapolis and Indianapolis, is utterly deplorable.

This most recent incident raises great concern, not only because it involves Veterans from my home state of Pennsylvania and my Congressional District, but also because the company, Unisys Corp., was a subcontractor of the Department of Veterans Affairs. While I understand your department cannot fully control every action of its employees, let alone its subcontractors, everyone entrusted by the VA with confidential information about our nation's veterans should be held to the same standards of data protection, and given the greatest amount of oversight by the Department.

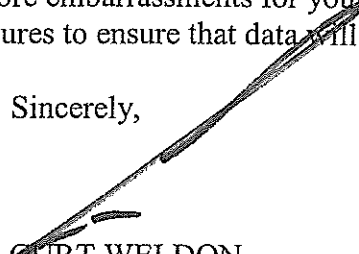
It is well-known to hackers that basic computer access security systems are easy to infiltrate. I would hope that you would agree that the information contained on these computers must be better protected, and that a feasible means for heightened security would be to encrypt any documents containing personal information.

On June 8, I requested information regarding the first reported theft, particularly the steps being taken to ensure the security of veterans' information, "such as encrypting data sets." In your testimony before Congress on June 29, you stated that the Department already has "several subject matter experts engaged to assist VA to develop a consolidated Data Security Program." The most recent incident of compromised data by your Department was not encrypted, meaning that although you may be in consultation and moving toward steps to better protect the data, the VA still has not implemented an effective plan.

Mr. Secretary, I implore you to take immediate steps to address this seemingly chronic problem of unsecured data and compromised Department computers holding sensitive personal information about America's veterans – you and I know these men and women deserve better.

In an effort to prevent any more embarrassments for your Department, I expect that you will implement the appropriate measures to ensure that data will at least be secure.

Sincerely,



CURT WELDON
Member of Congress